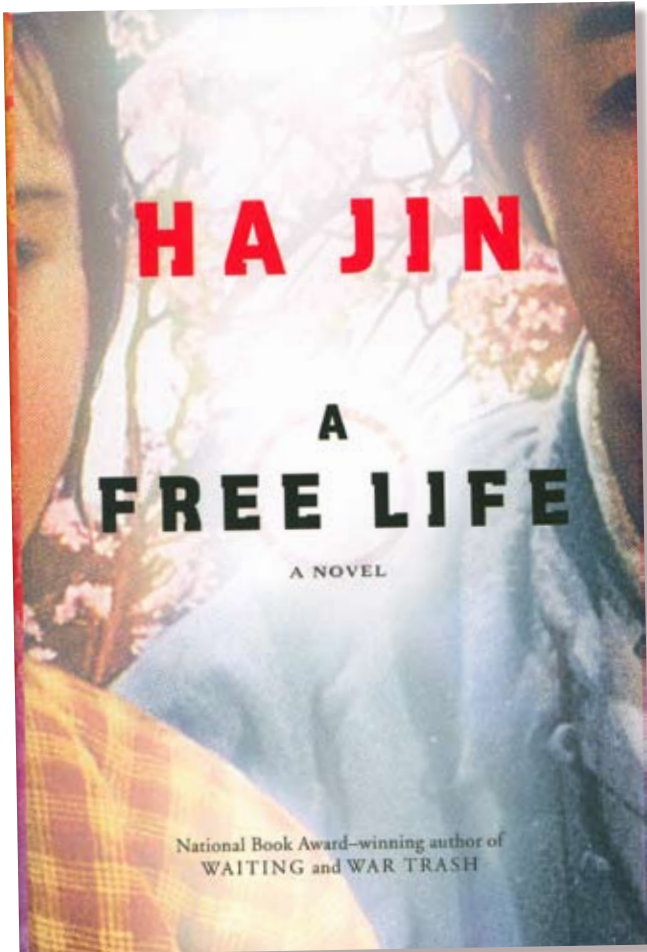


# 2008 One Book, One County Resource Guide



It's the book everyone in  
Kent County is reading!

# One Book, One County Programs

## Kent District Library – Book Discussions

Tuesday, February 12 at 10:00 a.m.

Thursday, February 14 at 6:30 p.m.

Thursday, February 14 at 6:45 p.m.

Friday, February 15 at 1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, February 19 at 1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, February 19 at 6:30 p.m.

Tuesday, February 19 at 6:30 p.m.

Wednesday, February 20 at 1:00 p.m.

Thursday, March 6 at 7:00 p.m.

Thursday, March 13 at 1:00 p.m.

Monday, March 17 at 10:00 a.m.

Tuesday, March 18 at 1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, March 19 at 1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, April 2 at 1:00 p.m.

Tuesday, April 8 at 10:00 a.m.

East Grand Rapids  
Branch

Grandville Branch

Krause Memorial Branch

Krause Memorial Branch

Sand Lake/Nelson  
Township Branch

Alto Branch

Wyoming Branch

Gaines Township Branch

Byron Township Branch

Plainfield Township  
Branch

Cascade Township  
Branch

Alpine Township Branch

Tyrone Township Branch

Caledonia Township  
Branch

Walker Branch

## **Grand Rapids Public Library – Book Discussions**

Tuesday, March 4 at 6:00 p.m.

West Leonard Branch

Thursday, March 6 at 7:00 p.m.

Main Library

Wednesday, March 12 at 10:00 a.m.

Yankee Clipper

Tuesday, March 18 at 6:00 p.m.

Seymour

## **Cedar Springs Public Library – Book Discussion**

Monday, March 17 at 7:00 p.m.

## **Humanities Council – Book Discussion**

Life Journey with Books

Thursday, March 20 at 9:30 a.m.

Cascade Township  
Branch of Kent District  
Library

## **Book Signing with Ha Jin**

Tuesday, April 1 at 12:00 p.m.

Schuler Books Downtown  
40 Fountain NW in  
Grand Rapids

## **Meet the Author and Book Signing**

Tuesday, April 1 at 7:00 p.m. at the Fountain Street Church,  
24 Fountain Street NE in Grand Rapids.

A reception and book signing will follow Ha Jin's presentation.

# Meet the Author, Ha Jin

A reception and  
book signing  
event will take  
place following  
the program.

**April 1, 2008  
at 7:00 p.m.**

Fountain  
Street Church  
24 Fountain Street  
NE, Grand Rapids



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For more information, visit  
**[www.onebookkent.org](http://www.onebookkent.org)**

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# Author Biography:

Xuefei Jin, who writes under the name Ha Jin, grew up in a small rural town in Liaoning Province in China. His father was a military officer. From the age of fourteen to nineteen he volunteered to serve in the People's Liberation Army, staying at the northeastern border between China and the former Soviet Union. He began teaching himself the middle and high-school courses since his third year in the army, which he left in the sixth year because he wanted to go to college.

In 1981 he graduated from Heilongjiang University with a Bachelor's degree in English studies, and three years later received his Master's in Anglo-American literature at Shangdong University. In 1985 Ha Jin came to the U.S. on a scholarship to Brandeis University. He supported himself as a busboy in a Chinese restaurant and as a night watchman in a factory. He earned his Ph.D. in English in 1993 and intended to return to China. But, after watching the coverage of the Tiananmen Square massacre, he and his wife (and their young son) decided to stay in the States. When he couldn't find teaching work, Ha Jin turned to writing.

Currently, Ha Jin teaches at Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts. He formerly taught at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He has published two volumes of poetry, *Between Silences* and *Facing Shadows*, and two books of short fiction, *Ocean Of Words*, which received the PEN Hemingway Award, and *Under The Red Flag*, which received the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and was a finalist for the Kiriyaama Pacific Rim Book Award. He also published a novella, *In The Pond*, which was selected as a best fiction book of 1998 by the Chicago Tribune. His short stories have been included in *The Best American Short Stories* (1997 and 1999), three Pushcart Prize anthologies, and Norton Introduction to Fiction and Norton Introduction to Literature, among other anthologies. *Waiting*, Ha Jin's first full-length novel, is the winner of the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2000 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Award for fiction. His next novel was *The Crazyed*. His novel *War Trash*, written in 2004, won the PEN/Faulkner Award and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. He has also written a collection of stories called, *The Bridgeroom*.

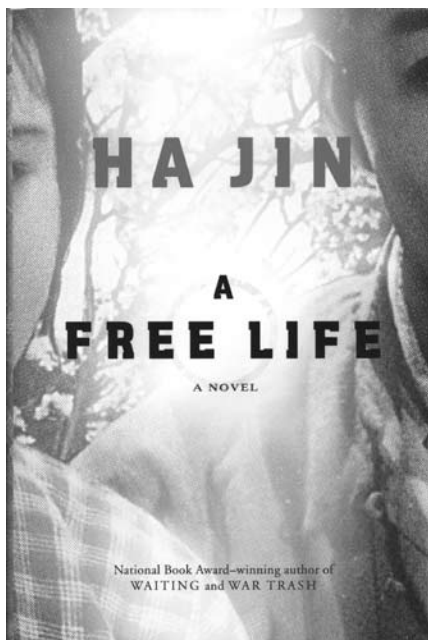
# A Free Life Summary

From Ha Jin, the widely-acclaimed, award-winning author of *Waiting* and *War Trash*, comes a novel that takes his fiction to a new setting: 1990s America. We follow the Wu family — father Nan, mother Pingping, and son Taotao — as they fully sever their ties with China in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and begin a new, free life in the United States.

At first, their future seems well-assured — Nan's graduate work in political science at Brandeis University would guarantee him a teaching position in China — but after the fallout from Tiananmen, Nan's disillusionment turns him towards his first love, poetry. Leaving his studies, he takes on a variety of menial jobs while Pingping works for a wealthy widow as a cook and housekeeper. As Nan struggles to adapt to a new language and culture, his love of poetry and literature sustains him through difficult, lean years.

Ha Jin creates a moving, realistic, but always hopeful narrative as Nan moves from Boston to New York to Atlanta, ever in search of financial stability and success, even in a culture that sometimes feels oppressive and hostile. As Pingping and Taotao slowly adjust to American life, Nan still feels a strange, paradoxical attachment to his homeland, though he violently disagrees with Communist policy. And severing all ties — including his love for a woman who rejected him in his youth — proves to be more difficult than he could have ever imagined.

Ha Jin's prodigious talents are evident in this powerful new book, which brilliantly brings to life the struggles and successes that characterize the contemporary immigrant experience. With its lyrical prose and confident grace, *A Free Life* is a luminous addition to the works of one of the preeminent writers in America today.



# Discussion Questions

1. Why does Nan leave China? How does he feel about his choice?
2. What do you think about the relationship between Nan and Pingping? Does the relationship change over time?
3. What role does Taotao play in the novel, especially in relation to how Nan and Pingping perceive living in America?
4. The characters Janet and Dave Mitchell provide Nan and Pingping an insight into a traditional American couple. What differences and similarities exist between the two couples?
5. On page 235 Nan states at the end of the chapter that China would never leave them alone. What does he mean by that?
6. What is Nan and Pingpings relationship to the Chinese immigrant community?
7. How does Nan feel about the United States?
8. Throughout the book Nan keeps pursuing his dream of writing poetry at varying degrees. Why do you think he keeps pursuing this dream? Does he have other dreams he wants to pursue?
9. Towards the end of the book Nan returns to China. What does he find? Does this affect him?
10. Describe the relationship between Nan and his son. How does he feel about his son and vice versa?

# Related Reading

## China and the Chinese-American Experience

*The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry*

This compendium of more than one thousand poems by 125 poets encompasses the full sweep of Chinese poetry, including ancient folk songs to twentieth-century poets.

Berman, Stuart Chang — *Potsticker Chronicles: America's Favorite Chinese Recipes: a Family Memoir*

Berman's tales of his Chinese-American family are accompanied by more than 160 recipes for Chinese dishes.

Chang, Iris — *The Chinese in America: a Narrative History*

The author of *The Rape of Nanking* chronicles the history of Chinese immigrants in the United States, identifying their many contributions to this country's development.

Fewsmith, Joseph — *China since Tiananmen: the Politics of Transition*

The author gives a comprehensive assessment of the evolution of China and Chinese society since the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989.

Li, Leslie — *Daughter of Heaven: a Memoir with Earthly Recipes*

The author recounts how her grandmother's traditional Chinese cuisine helped to bridge the cultural gap. Li provides personal recipes throughout the book, most from her grandmother's kitchen.



See, Lisa — *On Gold Mountain*

See, the author of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *Peony in Love*, has constructed this 100-year chronicle of her Chinese-American family. The result is a compelling history of two cultures meeting in a new world.

Jen, Gish — *Typical American*

Jen's wonderful first novel follows the hopeful lives of Chinese immigrants encountering America.

Tom, Amy — *The Joy Luck Club*

The story of four Chinese-American mothers and their daughters adjusting to life in America.

## Immigration Fiction

Alvarez, Julia — *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

After fleeing the Dominican Republic, four sisters struggle to adjust to their new life in America.

Arkin, Frieda — *Hedwig And Berti*

Hedwig and her husband flee Nazi Germany, arriving first in London and then America, toting a trunk of books that highlights her family's great achievements.

Bloom, Amy — *Away*

Lillian escapes to America after her family is massacred in a Russian Pogrom. When she learns that her daughter may still be alive in Siberia, Lillian sets forth on a treacherous journey home.

Boyle, T.C. - *The Tortilla Curtain*

Two very different lives, one of a wealthy suburban couple and the other illegal immigrants, are intertwined in this tragic tale.

Cather, Willa — *My Antonia*

A stirring portrait of an orphan boy and immigrant girl who find hardship - and love - on the American prairie.

Danticat, Edwidge – *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Twelve-year old Sophie leaves a happy existence in Haiti to live with the mother she's never known in New York City, and struggles to come of age in a new and difficult environment.

Díaz, Junot – *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Oscar, an overweight Dominican ghetto nerd, wants to find love, but he must battle with the curse that has been placed on his family.

Dubus, Andre – *The House of Sand and Fog*

An Iranian immigrant fights for a piece of the American dream – a house – in this tragic tale set in Southern California.

Eggers, Dave – *What Is The What*

Valentino escaped the horrors of the Sudanese civil war only to be plunged into another nightmare as he is held captive in his Atlanta apartment.

Erdrich, Louise – *Master Butchers Singing Club*

German soldier Fidelis Waldvogel packs up his new bride and his father's butcher knives and sets sail for America, settling in North Dakota.

Eugenides, Jeffrey – *Middlesex*

The son of immigrants who is also a hermaphrodite, Cal sets out to discover who he is by tracing a family secret back to his grandparents.

García, Cristina – *Dreaming In Cuban*

From Cuba to the United States, the lives of three generations of women in the del Pino family are intertwined in this colorful tale.

Hosseini, Khaled – *The Kite Runner*

The turmoil that is modern-day Afghanistan, seen through the eyes of two boys, one who flees to America and one who stays in Afghanistan.

Lahiri, Jhumpa – *The Namesake*

Told over 40 years, the story of Gogol Ganguli, son of Indian immigrants, and how he balances his Indian past with his American future.

Lahiri, Jhumpa - *The Interpreter of Maladies*

Pulitzer Prize winning collection of stories dealing with Indian immigrants adjusting to life in the United States.

Nunez, Sigrid – *A Feather on the Breath of God*

A nameless narrator (a young woman of mixed race), growing up in Brooklyn in the 1950s, tells the story of her immigrant parents.

Shteyngart, Gary – *The Russian Debutante*

Vladimir Girshkin, a likeable Russian immigrant, searches for love, a decent job, and a credible self-identity in New York City.

Sinclair, Upton – *The Jungle*

An unflinching chronicle of poverty and oppression set in Chicago's stockyards at the turn of the century, showing the appalling odds against which immigrants and other working people struggled for their share of the American dream.

Sontag, Susan – *In America*

A fictionalization of the American experience of celebrated 19th-century Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska.

## **Immigration Non-Fiction**

*American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood* – Maria Arana

Arana's memoir portraits the clashing of two worlds – her American mothers free-spirited life and her Peruvian fathers traditional one.

*Angela's Ashes* – Frank McCourt

Born in Brooklyn in 1930 to recent Irish immigrants, Frank's parents return to Ireland in the hopes of finding a better life in the homeland that they left.

*Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* – Firoozeh Dumas

In short, humorous passages, Dumas recounts her life beginning when her family moved to California from Iran when she was seven.

*Growing Up Ethnic In America (short stories)* – Maria M. Gillian, ed.

The stories and memoirs in this collection deal directly with the trials and difficulties with becoming American.

*I Love Gootie: My Grandmother's Story* – Max Apple

Max Apple's loving portrayal of his grandmother Gootie who was born in a Lithuanian shtetl and eventually came to Michigan in 1923.

*Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir* – Bich Minh Nguyen

Bich (pronounced "bit") grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan having left Vietnam when she was less than a year old. Her struggle to assimilate comes in the form of junk food – she becomes obsessed with Pringles, Twinkies, Happy Meals and Kit Kats.

*West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story* – Mir Tamim Ansary

Born in Afghanistan to an Afghan father and American mother, Mir strives to understand and balance the struggle between the East and the West, both of which he is a part.

## Immigration In Films

*The Kite Runner (2007)*

Directed by Marc Forster (*Stranger Than Fiction*), this is the story of the turmoil that is modern-day Afghanistan, seen through the eyes of two boys, one who flees to America and one who stays in Afghanistan.

*God Grew Tired Of Us (2006)*

The film follows three Sudanese boys who are refugees from Sudan's civil war, as they try to adjust to life in the U.S.

*NameSake (2006)*

Directed by Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*), this is the story of Gogol Ganguli, son of Indian immigrants, and how he balances his Indian past with his American future.

*Sweet Land (2006)*

Based on a short story, *Sweet Land* tells of how the American heartland was settled by immigrants.

*Everything Is Illuminated (2005)*

A young American Jew makes a pilgrimage to a small Ukrainian town to look into his family's past. The film stars Elijah Wood and is based on the book by Jonathan Safran Foer.

*Romántico (2005)*

Two Mariachi musicians come to San Francisco in the hopes of having a better life.

*Three Burials Of Melquiades Estrada (2005)*

Tommy Lee Jones stars in this tale of a Texas cowboy and his best friend who is an illegal immigrant. Jones also directed the film.

*A Day Without A Mexican (2004)*

One third of the population of California is Hispanic, Latino and Mexican. What would happen to this state if one day all of the Mexicans were gone?

*Saving Face (2004)*

A loving look at mother-daughter relationships and the clash between first and second generation Chinese immigrants. Stars Joan Chen.

*Spanglish (2004)*

A Mexican woman and her daughter come to the U.S. to seek a better life and end up working for an American family. Stars Adam Sandler, Tea Leoni and Cloris Leachman.

*House Of Sand And Fog (2003)*

An Iranian immigrant fights for a piece of the American dream – a house – in this tragic tale set in Southern California. The film was nominated for three Academy Awards and stars Sir Ben Kingsley and Jennifer Connelly.

*In America (2003)*

The story of a modern-day Irish family that heads to New York in the hopes of attaining the American dream. This film was nominated for three Academy Awards and was directed by Jim Sheridan (*In The Name Of The Father and My Left Foot*).

*My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002)*

Toula, who is Greek, falls in love with Ian, who is not, in this funny tale of love and family.

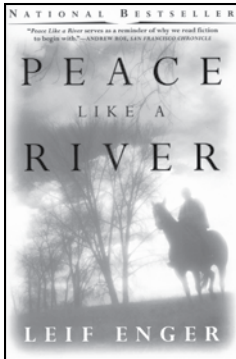
*Gangs Of New York (2002)*

Nineteenth-century New York is a hot bed of violence as Irish immigrants try to make room for themselves. Directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Cameron Diaz and Daniel Day Lewis. This film was nominated for ten Academy awards.

*The Joy Luck Club (1993)*

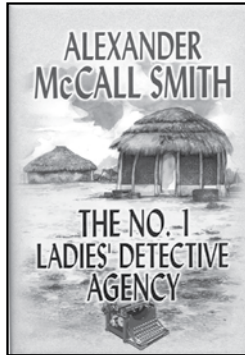
The story of four Chinese-American mothers and their daughters, adjusting to life in America.

# One Book, One County Past Titles



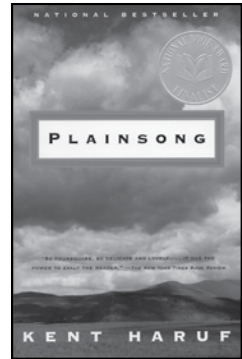
**2003**

*Peace Like a  
River* by Leif  
Enger



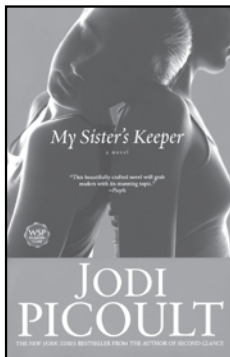
**2004**

*The No. 1 Ladies'  
Detective Agency*  
by Alexander  
McCall Smith



**2005**

*Plainsong* by  
Kent Haruf



**2006**

*My Sister's  
Keeper* by  
Jodi Picoult



**2007**

*October Sky* by  
Homer Hickam

Recommend a title for next year's One Book,  
One County at [www.onebookkent.org](http://www.onebookkent.org)!

# Participating Organizations and Sponsors

**Sparta Township Library**  
80 North Union Street  
Sparta, Michigan 49345  
559-5253

**Cedar Springs Public Library**  
43 West Cherry Street  
Cedar Springs, MI 49319  
696-1910

**Humanities Council  
of Grand Rapids**  
PO Box 230262  
Grand Rapids, MI 49523  
774-1776

**Bethany Christian Services**

**Public Museum Grand Rapids**

**World Affairs Council**

**KDL Alliance of Friends**

**Michigan Radio**

**Ryerson Library Foundation**

**WZZM 13**

**Schuler Books & Music**  
3165 Alpine Ave.  
Walker, MI 49544  
647-0999

2660 28th St. SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49512  
942-2561

40 Fountain N.W.  
Grand Rapids, MI 49503  
459-7750

## Grand Rapids Public Library Branches

**Main Library**  
111 Library Street NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49503  
988-5400

**Madison Square**  
1201 Madison SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49507  
988-5411

**Ottawa Hills**  
1150 Giddings SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49506  
988-5412

**Seymour**  
2350 Eastern SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49507  
988-5413

**Van Belkum Branch  
at Creston**  
1563 Plainfield NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49505  
988-5410

**West Leonard**  
1017 Leonard NW  
Grand Rapids, MI 49504  
988-5416

**West Side**  
713 Bridge NW  
Grand Rapids, MI 49504  
988-5414

**Yankee Clipper**  
2025 Leonard NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49505  
988-5415

## Kent District Library Branches

**Alpine Township Branch**  
5255 Alpine Ave. NW  
Comstock Park, MI 49321  
647-3810

**Alto Branch**  
6071 Linfield Ave.  
Alto, MI 49302  
647-3820

**Byron Township Branch**  
8191 Byron Center Ave. SW  
Byron Center, MI 49315  
647-3830

**Caledonia Township Branch**  
240 Emmons St.  
Caledonia, MI 49316  
647-3840

**Cascade Township Branch**  
2870 Jacksmith Ave. SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546  
647-3850

**Comstock Park Branch**  
3943 W. River Dr. NE  
Comstock Park, MI 49321  
647-3860

**East Grand Rapids Branch**  
746 Lakeside Dr. SE  
East Grand Rapids, MI 49506  
647-3880

**Gaines Township Branch**  
421 - 68th St. SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49548  
647-3870

**Grandville Branch**  
4055 Maple St. SW  
Grandville, MI 49418  
647-3890

**Kentwood Branch**  
4700 Kalamazoo Ave. SE  
Kentwood, MI 49508  
647-3910

**Krause Memorial Branch**  
140 E. Bridge St.  
Rockford, MI 49341  
647-3940

**Englehardt Branch**  
200 N. Monroe St.  
Lowell, MI 49331  
647-3920

**Plainfield Township Branch**  
2650 - 5 Mile Rd. NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49525  
647-3930

**Sand Lake/Nelson  
Township Branch**  
88 Eight Street  
Sand Lake, MI 49343  
636-4251

**Spencer Township Branch**  
14960 Meddler Ave.  
Gowen, MI 49326  
984-5680

**Tyrone Township Branch**  
43 S. Main St.  
Kent City, MI 49330  
678-4710

**Walker Branch**  
4293 Remembrance Rd. NW  
Walker, MI 49544  
647-3970

**Wyoming Branch and the  
Library for the Blind and  
Physically Handicapped**  
3350 Michael Ave. SW  
Wyoming, MI 49509  
647-3980